Dramatising Cultural Diversity: Youth Theatre as a Performance of Local Memory and Identity in a Multiethnic Environment

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This article presents a comparative analysis of two ethnographic case studies conducted in local theatres in the Slovak town of Komárno and the British city of Coventry. These two locations are very different – one is a small town on the Slovak-Hungarian border and the other an urban centre in the Midlands region of Britain – and yet they are both characterised by the multiethnic and culturally diverse composition of their populations. The two youth theatres in question are also distinct in their genres: one bases its performances on folklore traditions, whereas the other is an avant-garde physical theatre. At the same time, the productions of both groups manifest a deep involvement in the representation of cultural heritage and the current social issues in their respective locations. Drawing on anthropological conceptualisations of theatre as a form of ritualised performance (see Turner, 1969, 1982; Schechner, 1985, 1993), this paper explores the processes and contexts of the enactment of past conflict and/or violence presented by the two theatrical groups in order to engage with traumatic events in local (and national) history. These processes, which embrace the values of cultural diversity and inclusion, are important for the construction of community identities. The liminality of ritualised performance enables actors and audiences to cross social (including ethnicity and class) and temporal boundaries. They reproduce memories of past violence to make sense of present tensions, such as growing nationalism and xenophobia, and to project their vision of the communal future. This often results in the contestation of the very meaning of place, community and belonging. Furthermore, the article demonstrates that such artistic interpretations of the local past and heritage are instrumental in shaping the identities of the participating youth. The comparison of the two cases also reveals noticeable differences between cosmopolitan and ethno-cultural discourses, which are prevalent in imagining the place, history and heritage of Coventry and Komárno respectively.

Key words: youth theatre, multiethnic environment, heritage representation, cultural diversity, performance

INTRODUCTION

> *A figure appeared clutching a suitcase.*
> *Stars and constellations take shape, providing a pathway…*
> *Far away memories, of a place that was, is or might be home.*
> (*Home*, show leaflet, 15 September 2019)

This rather poetic passage from a show leaflet collected during a performance by the Coventry-based youth physical theatre group imagined a powerful connection between the past (and its memories), the present and the possible future as they were presented in the city's historical centre. It also refers to the notion of 'home', which is central to both the ethnographic case studies – the youth physical theatre (Coventry, UK) and the folk-drama group (Komárno, Slovakia) – this article draws upon. As can be seen in the cited excerpt, in these productions home appears as a metaphor for historically traceable and emplaced communities. At the same time, how these communities chose which memories to include in the formation of this metaphorical future home remains a contested topic, as this paper will argue by exploring heritage as a public event and performance.

During the last two decades, critical cultural heritage studies have been shaped by ongoing debates on the transformative potential of heritage in a globalised world (Novicka, Rovisco, *Eds.*, 2009; Macdonald, 2013; Feldman, 2008). At the core of this approach, there is an understanding of cultural heritage as a mnemonic process. This is manifested through 'ideologically loaded politicized discourses' and 'discursive practices', with both aspects being essential for identity construction (Rowlands, 2002). This paper answers the anthropologists' call to critically revisit heritage as an ethno-national and territorialised 'hegemonic idiom' by analysing its processual nature as heritage-making (Franquesa, 2013). Therefore, the focus of our analysis is on how culture and the past are re-articulated and re-contextualised through performances staged by the two youth theatres, and how these practices reflect cultural changes and instigate public debates about the future.

This paper explores youth theatre[1] as a form of publicly performed heritage event (Simon, Ashley, 2010). More specifically, it raises questions about performativity as a ritualised practice (building on and critically reassessing the theoretical legacy of Victor Turner and Richard Schechner) that enables performers, their audiences and wider society to transcend different temporalities while engaging with cultural heritage in order

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[1] For the purpose of this paper, we define youth theatre as part of what Ennis and Tonkin (2018: 343) call 'youth arts' – young people's extra-curricular activities focused 'on creating, participating and/or engaging in facilitated artistic or cultural activity'. Observers note that youth arts (including youth theatre) is a term often employed by diverse institutional actors in youth development programmes seen as important instruments for young people's socialisation and wellbeing (Ennis, Tonkin, 2018; Atkinson, Robson, 2012).

to contest the meanings of culture and identities as they are defined in the present. We are particularly interested in how, by engaging with the past through such performances, groups and communities challenge existing lines of cultural and social exclusion and imagine an alternative future, with supposedly more inclusive forms of social solidarities. At the same time, our analysis looks at the theatrical representation of culture and the past as a type of ritualised performance that exposes the tension between aspiration to social change and the reproduction of a group's values and sense of identity.

The locations of the two ethnographic case studies presented are very different, and yet they are both characterised by the multiethnic and culturally diverse composition of their populations. This sets the issue of cultural inclusivity in the representation of the past, or indeed in the projections of the future, at the centre of local identity politics at both sites.

The authors spent up to fourteen months with the respective groups conducting participant observations of weekly sessions and staged productions. In addition to fieldwork diaries, the empirical data for this paper were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with young performers, their parents and theatre practitioners.[2] In Coventry, we interviewed fifteen young performers (aged 14–18), two of their older family members and three theatre practitioners. In Komárno, ten interviews were recorded with young members of the folk-drama group (aged 14–25). In order to protect participants' identities, the Coventry theatre group has been anonymised and hereafter will be referred to in the text as 'the Theatre'. As the following discussion of the case studies context will demonstrate, anonymisation of the Komárno group would obscure our empirical data and weaken the crucial political and cultural insights. All participants are referred to in the paper by pseudonym and age only.

TWO CASE STUDIES: YOUTH THEATRES IN THE LOCAL CONTEXT

The two theatrical groups we researched actively engage with ideas of culture and heritage by staging public performances that function effectively as 'heritage events'. They use heritage practice as an arena for social participation, engaging the public in a negotiation of the meanings of local and national identity (Simon, Ashley, 2010). The themes that both groups choose when performing the local heritage are often politically charged and contest the existing interpretations of past events. Thus, in this section we introduce the performances investigated in this paper within the social, political and cultural context of their localities.

Slovenskí rebeli in a Slovak-Hungarian border town

The folklore-drama group *Slovenskí rebeli* (Slovak Rebels) is based in the ethnically mixed town of Komárno, on the Slovak border with Hungary. Komárno has over 34,000 inhabitants. In the 2011 census, 53.8% of the town's population reported being of

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2   In Coventry, the empirical data were gathered by Anton Popov in collaboration with Ebru Soytemel and Katie McNie. In Komárno, research was carried out by Matej Karásek in collaboration with Lucia Hržičová.

Hungarian ethnicity, and 33.5% Slovak. *Slovenskí rebeli* (founded in 2012) has around 50 members, most of whom are aged between 14 and 25 years. The vast majority of the secondary school age members attend the Slovak gymnasium (grammar school) in the town.[3] Membership of the group is not limited by age, and the group has around 15 members over 25 years old.

Formally, the group is part of *Matica slovenská*, an organisation established in the 19th century to support Slovak culture and science when Slovakia was part of the Hungarian Kingdom (and later the Austro-Hungarian Empire). Recently, *Matica slovenská* has been criticised in mainstream and social media for being ideologically stuck in the nationalist 19th century or – even worse – in the era of Slovak fascism during the Second World War.

The relationships between the Komárno local branch and *Matica slovenská*'s headquarters have deteriorated, not least because *Slovenskí rebeli* reject the organisation's nationalist ideology and anti-Hungarian discourse and aim to bring Slovaks and Hungarians together as a single town community. Externally, *Slovenskí rebeli* might be considered an ethnically mixed Slovak-Hungarian group; however, the ethnic identification of the young performers, who mostly originate from bilingual families, is not so straightforward. Our participants identified with the town they inhabit, defining it as *one culture in two languages*. Despite being a 'black sheep' within *Matica slovenská* with their liberal and antinationalist attitudes, *Slovenskí rebeli* still depend on the organisation financially and logistically.

The young performers' understanding of their local community in terms of *one culture in two languages* is demonstrated in their latest production inspired by the folklore of the south-eastern Slovak village Bidovce.[4] It was 17-year-old Lívia's idea to present the local culture of Bidovce. The village is inhabited by both Slovaks and Hungarians and is known for that fact that many of its local folk songs are bilingual: a *sloka* (verse) in one language is followed by a *sloka* in the other. Even though the village is in a different part of the country from Komárno, the young members were deeply interested in its traditions and pointed out analogies between Bidovce and their ethnically-mixed hometown and group. As Ivana (20) reflected in her interview, *this dance could be the embodiment of what we are*. The performance was named after the pivotal song of the play, *Secret Love* (*Tajná láska* in Slovak, *Titkos szerelem* in Hungarian). The group members claimed that, just as there are two languages in this song, there are two languages in one culture. Therefore, the production was entitled *Tajná láska/Titkos szerelem: One Culture in Two Languages*.

While *Secret Love* is a fictional romance, another play *Helenka* is based on the real and to a large extent traumatic story of a Slovak woman who, like many others, moved to the mainly Hungarian region of Komárno in southern Slovakia. Her life there was interrupted by the dramatic events of the twentieth century, when in 1938 the region

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3   There is also a Hungarian gymnasium in the town. However, Slovak schools are considered better, and many Slovak Hungarians send their children there to prepare them for study or life in the linguistic environment of the majority population.

4   Although the premiere of the performance was planned for December 2020, due to the Covid-19 lockdown, the rehearsals were interrupted; therefore, at the time of writing this paper, the play had not yet been staged.

was handed to Hungary. Many of the Slovaks living in the area (both older inhabitants and the new settlers who came in the 1920s), had to leave their houses and move north of the new border. After WWII, a *population exchange* between Czechoslovakia and Hungary took place and Helenka returned home, but Hungarians were forced to leave. These historical events resulted in long-term trauma for both Slovaks and Hungarians. The Hungarian side of the story is absent in the play. Although the play does not depict Hungarian settlers as enemies, it does not acknowledge them as the victims of the same tragic historical events either. Significantly, the effect of enacting these powerful memories is amplified by the fact that the performance took place in the garden of Helenka's original house: which is also the ancestral home of Jozef (42), one of the folk-drama group leaders. For the audience, such settings give greater authenticity to the play, which in turn authorises whose memory of the past will define the future of this multiethnic but still divided community.

The Theatre in the UK City of Culture

In the UK, the research is located in the city of Coventry, part of the metropolitan area of the West Midlands. Coventry is a large city with a population of 360,100 people.[5] Although the majority (66.6%) of the city's population is White British (including English, Scottish and Welsh), the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the city is higher than that of the West Midlands and the national average.[6] The index of multiple deprivation (IMD) is relatively high, with Coventry placed as the 38th most deprived city in the country in 2015 (Coventry City Council, 2015).

In December 2017, Coventry won its bid for the 2021 UK City of Culture. This led to the establishment of the Coventry City of Culture Trust, an independent charity tasked with the delivery of the City of Culture programme. While acknowledging the city's industrial heritage as the cradle of British car manufacturing, as well as its (post-)WWII history, the programme primarily puts forward an image of Coventry as a culturally vibrant and diverse place. The trust's website states bluntly that its aim is to elevate the city from its reputation of being a social-deprived place badly hit by deindustrialisation.[7] Although it is a relatively small independent charity,[8] the Theatre played an active role in Coventry's bid for the UK 2021 City of Culture, seeing it as an opportunity to obtain additional funding for their work with young people.

The cultural events and projects initiated by the City of Culture Trust constituted an important context for our research, which has been reflected in the productions/shows that were observed in the case of The Theatre, for example. Two of The Theatre's recent performances – *Seen But Never Heard* (SBNH) and *Home* – were developed as part of the

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5   https://www.coventry.gov.uk/info/195/facts_about_coventry/2435/population_and_demographics.
6   The second-largest ethnic group is Asian/Asian British (16.3%), followed by White Other (7.2%). According to the 2011 census, Polish is the third most spoken language in Coventry after English and Panjabi (https://www.coventry.gov.uk/downloads/file/18906/census_2011_coventry_residents_by_main_language_spoken)
7   https://coventry2021.co.uk/why-coventry/.
8   The Theatre was established as a company in 2000 and became an independent charity organisation in 2018. It provides dance and performance training to children and young people aged 4 to 21; about 100 young performers attend three groups organised according to the age of participants.

City of Culture programme, which celebrates Coventry's cultural diversity and inclusivity framed within what Macdonald (2013: 200) calls 'cosmopolitan memory' being structured by the discourse of human rights.[9] Thus, the City of Culture Trust launched the campaign 'Humans of Coventry' in December 2018. The campaign is dedicated to the 70th anniversary of the UN Declaration of Human Rights (Rodger, 2019). This connection between human rights and the history of migration to Coventry, which has shaped the city's current cultural diversity, draws upon the 'city of sanctuary' discourse that is arguably central to how 'inclusivity' is interpreted and represented by the city's culture and heritage institutions.[10]

One of the shows observed, *Home*, is an original and highly innovative multi-dimensional show staged by The Theatre in collaboration with two other theatrical groups specialised in aerial performance and visual projection. It took place at night on 15 September 2019 in Coventry city centre. The performance combined vertical dances, with a visual light show and original music. The vertical dances were executed by The Theatre's professional troop suspended high above the ground against the wall of one of Coventry University's buildings with youth performers acting on the ground. The wall was also used as a giant screen on which moving images representing the city's past and future were projected while the suspended dancers were interacting with each other and the projected images. The show interprets Coventry's history and its future trajectory, emphasising the city's cosmopolitan heritage that is 'shaped and re-shaped by the people who live and work in it' (*Home*, show leaflet). Thus, rather than being a representation of historical events, it re-imagined the past and the future of Coventry as a city of migrants. The show and, hence, the history of the city starts with the 'Arrival' of migrants in search of a 'home, a place to belong' (*Home*, show leaflet). In its references to the local and national history, the show, thus, highlights some events/periods while skipping over others. For example, the 'Industry' part of the show is dedicated to the nineteenth century Industrial Revolution as a 'golden era' that put Coventry in the national and international arena as an industrial centre. This is followed by a 'Gathering Clouds' section, which contains clear references to the de-industrialisation of the 1970s-1980s and the more recent recession of 2008 as representations of the 'difficult past'. The show culminates in a colourful display of flowers that symbolises the future. Here the diversity is visualised in the multiplicity and vibrancy of colours 'In Bloom'.

In *Home*, the public participated in the event both acting as spectators and enacting a new vision of the city's community. In this show, The Theatre's young performers acted

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9 Fossum, Kastoryano, Modood, Zapata-Barrera (2020) name cosmopolitanism together with multiculturalism, interculturalism and transnationalism as the main policy/theoretical approaches to diversity management and understanding of public space. Cosmopolitanism is defined through its universalist orientation in the conception of understanding public space as inclusive and allowing the extension of 'rights-based entitlements beyond nation-state membership' (ibid.: 9). The policies based on a cosmopolitanism approach prioritise individual rights over collective actions in diversity management (ibid.: 21). Therefore it differs from both multiculturalist policies as well as other approaches that define cultural rights and entitlements building on understanding culture in terms of ethno-national identification of groups within the nation-state.

10 The City of Sanctuary is a charity organisation founded in 2005 that coordinates a network of groups in villages, towns and cities promoting 'the vision that our nations will be welcoming places of safety for all and proud to offer sanctuary to people fleeing violence and persecution'. Coventry's branch of The City of Sanctuary is supported by 78 local organisations, including a number of heritage institutions (https://cityofsanctuary.org/about/).

on the ground using props to enhance the mediation of the meanings of the vertical dances and visual light show on the wall to the audience and effectively turning the spectators into the participants of the performance. Thus, 'Arrival' was in fact the arrival of spectators at the show, met by young people performing a dance with suitcases symbolising the arrival of migrants. Here young people operated the props symbolising the culturally diverse history of the city that was in effect the central idea of the show.[11]

The topic of migration and human rights is also central to the second show (*SBNH*), which was staged at Coventry's Belgrade Theatre in June 2019. Performed entirely by the young people, the show took place during Refugee Week. The show is built around the stories of two girls. The two storylines intersect at some point in the future in Britain. One line of the plot is the story of a young British schoolgirl, starting in some imagined past with allusions to the Thatcher era of the 1980s. The girl had rebelled against the strict school discipline and inequalities she witnessed around her in society. She later became a politician fighting for the rights of those who were deprived and marginalised by the system. The other storyline is a clear reference to the so-called 'Refugee Crisis' of 2015 and tells the story of a little girl who fled the conflict in the Middle East or North Africa, became a refugee and was separated from her parents whilst boarding a people-smuggler's boat to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Europe. The little girl eventually arrived in the UK where she faced the cold and dehumanising bureaucracy of the asylum system. The violence and distress she had been subjected to were conveyed almost entirely through very expressive and volatile physical interactions between actors on the stage, leaving her voiceless for most of the show. The girl was eventually helped by a female politician – the grown up girl from the other story line – and built a fulfilling life in Britain. At the end of the show, as a middle-aged woman, she meets the teenage grandchildren of this politician, who were spending their time hanging out at the playground during the funeral of their grandmother. They were frustrated that their concerns were not taken seriously by adults. The former refugee girl, now able to tell them the story of their grandmother, inspired them to fight for their voices to be heard.

Before presenting the analysis of these performances and the interpretations of the past that underpin them in both our research locations, we need to discuss the theoretical frameworks of our study of theatrical performances as part of cultural heritage.

CONCEPTUALISING HERITAGE EVENTS AS RITUALISED PERFORMANCE

Our approach to heritage performances and heritage as performative practice is based on four theoretical premises. Firstly, the analysis of theatrical performances as heritage events is made possible by understanding heritage as a process or practice. Highlighting the processual rather than the objectified nature of cultural heritage, Breglia introduces the concept of 'heritage-as-practice', which implies that heritage is constituted by and

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11 Some observers of cosmopolitan memorial culture maintain that suitcases are an often-used trope in the representation of the 'cultural baggage' that migrants carry with them (see Macdonald, 2013; Poehls, 2011).

through social relationships and 'contingent practice situated in actual time and space' (Breglia, 2006: 35). Franquesa (2013) builds on this conceptualisation by demonstrating that a narrow notion of heritage-as-object abstracts its processual nature, and itself is a result of turning heritage into the 'political field' of competing groups. This implies that cultural heritage is indeed 'an ideologically loaded politicised discourse' (ibid.: 347). The vision of heritage as simply material structures or objects from the past that need to be protected is closely linked to the idea of culture as sameness. According to Ashley, the alternative to this sanitised vision should recognise that cultural heritage is 'a complex of histories, stories, things, practices and ways of thinking that we want to pass to future generations' (2013: 6).

Secondly, forms of engagement with heritage, including commemorative performances and theatrical interpretations of history as far as this paper is concerned, need to be analysed in the context of, and as part of, other cultural processes that are constitutive to the 'politics of memory' – memorialisation and identity construction (Boyarin, 1994; Pine, Kaneff, Haukanes, *Eds.*, 2004). Heritage is one of the domains in which a contemporary European preoccupation with the past is manifested. Together with two other elements – memory and identity – it constitutes what Sharon Macdonald (2013: 5) defines as a 'memory complex'. All three elements are interwoven into 'past presencing', a framework for various modalities of engaging with the past in the present, in which neither the past nor the present – or, indeed, the future – are pre-defined. Thus, 'past presencing' frames diverse processes and practices through which these temporalities are imagined, experienced and lived in (ibid.: 17). Similar to the concept of the 'memory complex' is the observation that heritage is a 'discursive practice' of collective memory and is, therefore, essential for the construction of cultural identity (Rowlands, 2002; Stolcke, 1995). In temporal-spatial terms, this hegemonic representation of heritage is manifested by what Michael Herzfeld (1991: 10) calls the 'monumental time' of national heritage, which is fossilised within the official (mainstream) interpretation of the past and is opposed to the 'social time' of everyday experience and 'living memory' (Nora, 1989).

This leads us to the third premise of a performative experience of heritage as a heritage event. While materially heritage is situated in spaces, affectively it is experienced by the senses, through narratives and performances that might infuse social time and living memory in the nation-centred hegemonic interpretations of the past. Thus, Ashley maintains that the public expression of such a multi-layered heritage enables the self-definition of individuals and communities that are part of the process through which meanings of the past, identity and culture are transmitted (2013: 6). This processual and relational understanding of heritage sets it up as a political field, where present social conditions are debated through engagement with the past, while forms and meanings of culture and identity are contested. Furthermore, arguably, heritage as a site of social and political contestation is realised through its public and performative aspects (see Simon, Ashley, 2010; Gordon-Walker, 2013; Bergman, 2010; Macdonald, 2013; Ashley, 2013). Simon and Ashley define heritage events as 'enacted moments wherein heritage practices constitute an "event", a turning point in or break with existing patterns of social existence, that hold the promise of bringing something new into the world' (2010: 249). As in the case of the productions staged by both *Slovenskí rebeli* and The Theatre, heritage events are directed at the public, activating its potential as a site of learning and for the production of new forms of social solidarity (ibid.).

Heritage events as performative practices do not simply enact the past's cultural legacy in the present social and political reality; they produce a dialogic space in which audiences are actively engaged with the performed interpretations of cultural heritage. For example, in the *Home* and *Helenka* productions the audiences are very much actors of the performative space. In fact, these interpretations, and, indeed, social and cultural identities, are produced and constructed with the expectation that they will resonate with the public's concerns and values (see, for example, Bergman, 2010; Tyler, 2010). The inclusion of a diverse public is embedded in heritage events. Therefore, according to Simon and Ashley (2010), such events enable the emergence of more inclusive forms of heritage, which both reflect changes in society and facilitate social change. The transformative capacity of heritage events lies in their performative character, which suggests to the audience and wider society, forms of solidarity that differ from the dominant and mainstream forms of cultural representation. To imagine and experience these new solidarities, the audience of a heritage performance enters 'a subjunctive universe' where new possible forms of sociality (the 'could be' reality) are imagined and enacted 'as if' they are a reality (Bergman, 2010: 80; see also Schechner, 2002 and Seligman, Weller, Puett, Simon, 2008). This makes heritage performance akin to other, more traditional, performative forms such as ritual.

Our final premise, which is essential to our understanding how the social status quo is both challenged and reproduced through the shows we have researched, builds upon critical engagement with Schechner's (1993) theory of theatrical performance as a ritualised behaviour that operates 'in between' or in liminal space, enabling and manifesting cultural creativity (see also Turner, 1977: 73). Critics of the extension of ritual to encompass all forms of performative acts propose that play is a precursor of any marked behaviour, including ritual and performance (Maxwell, 2017). Play provides 'the ambiguous testing and affirming of limits, a process sometimes heightened as explicit reflection' (Lewis, 2013: 35 cited in Maxwell, 2017: 9). Rituals and performances create what Turner (1977: 68) calls a liminal space, where performers and audiences might deviate from the everyday routine and at the same time reiterate the social norms and shared values that are important in upholding a sense of community. The performance of rituals leads thus to a realisation of identity. Theatrical performance in modern societies partly fulfils the function of reproducing social norms. For Turner, the theatre is 'a reflexive metacommentary on society and history' in a particular time and place (ibid.: 73). Schechner (1993), however, suggests that change, rather than the reification of existing structures, has become a major preoccupation of modern society; therefore, social transformations are at the core of modern forms of performativity such as theatre and modern dance. The predictability of liminality in a traditional ritual is juxtaposed against the 'liminoid' uncertainty of modernity (Turner, 1974: 84), the latter being an expression of the ritual process in post-industrial societies (Weber, 1995: 529).[12]

Turner's concept of liminality as central to ritual has been criticised for its lack of recognition of the impact of wider power coordinates on liminars who are viewed as implicitly apolitical (Weber, 1995: 531). Ethnographies of traditional and modern ritual

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12 Turner and Schechner do not see liminal and liminoid as mutually exclusive states of the community in the context of ritualised performance. Rather, in different historical and cultural contexts one prevails over the other (Turner, 1974: 84; Dawsey, 2018: 379).

practices demonstrate that rather than producing inclusive 'communitas', liminal rituals might reinforce 'social, cultural and religious distinctions' (St John, 2001: 49). A similar criticism has been extended to Schechner's application of ritual to performativity, suggesting that ritualised performances are not culturally universal but might be indicative of the desire for distinction in some voluntary 'culture-like groupings' (Maxwell, 2017: 11). Other critics have challenged Turner's overreliance on the symbolic function of ritual process. For Schieffelin (2013: 108), it is performativity – the manner of delivery (non-semantic aspects like the arrangement of space and the organisation of the audience, the embodied media and props used in performance) – rather than the symbolism of ritual that makes it effective in the construction of a social reality. This implies that the efficacy of ritualised performance depends on the receptivity of audiences, who are an integral part of such events as the arbiters and authenticators of the performed reality (ibid.: 117). These two critical observations resonate with the idea that heritage events are politically-informed engagements of the public with embodied and enacted interpretations of culture and history (Simon, Ashley, 2010: 249). In the following sections, we will look first at how the two theatres in question symbolically enact the past in order to imagine more inclusive futures for their localities. Then we will discuss the efficacy of such performances for the contestation and/or reproduction of structural inequalities.

PRESENTING THE PAST AS INCLUSIVE HERITAGE IN KOMÁRNO AND COVENTRY

The two theatrical groups creatively and proactively engage with the traumas and violence of the past in an attempt to express a position on the contested political issues of the present. This, in turn, is a process of the negotiation of social and cultural values. These performances, informed by interpretations of the past (sometimes directly referencing family memory, as in the case of the Komárno folklore group), aim to project a vision of the future for a wider society – or at least for their respective localities. All three temporalities, for instance, are interwoven into the storylines and scenography of The Theatre's shows in Coventry. Therefore, these performances function effectively as 'heritage events' that use heritage practice (in both its discursive and objectified form) as an arena for social participation. They engage the public in a negotiation of the meanings of local and national identity (Simon, Ashley, 2010: 249).

In Komárno, the common denominator of the majority of *Slovenskí rebeli* participants is their ethnically mixed and bilingual family background. They are also weakly bound to a (politically-defined) ethnic identity and the high profile of the schools they attend.[13] These young people also display liberal attitudes towards various contentious topics, such as immigration, LGBT rights, and religious and ethnic diversity. *Slovenskí rebeli*

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13 Mock elections amongst Slovak high school students in 2020 demonstrated that, while the liberal party *Progresívne Slovensko* had the highest level of support from gymnasium students (30% of votes), the extremist far-right party *Kotlebovci-Ľudová strana naše Slovensko* had the highest number of votes among students at vocational colleges (18%) (see, https://euractiv.sk/section/buducnost-eu/news/slovenski-stredoskolaci-su-vyrazne-proeuropski-ukazali-simulovane-eurovolby).

tend to see their town as the product of the historical achievements of its inhabitants, rather than in exclusivist ethno-national terms. The informants preferred to identify themselves through a sense of belonging to the locality or region. As Magdaléna (21) stated: *I don't distinguish between Slovak and Hungarian. I say an inhabitant of Komárno.*

Our informants demonstrated the same inclusive attitude to competing ethno-nationalist representations of the local past. Thus, the past of the town, which was once part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and its complex ethnic composition, with two groups competing over the representations of local history, make Komárno a town of contested monuments. Statues of figures from *Hungarian* and *Slovak* history are regularly erected in the town, reflecting the competing nationalist discourses about the local history. However, our young informants did not see any contradiction in this. From their point of view, the heroes of nationalist narratives either lived in or were somehow important to their hometown; hence, they have a rightful place in Komárno's squares and streets. Rather than it being a contest, the young informants welcomed the statues' coexistence in the town.

They understand the concept of *cultural heritage* in a similar way. Despite the fact that their productions are in Slovak and mostly represent the folklore of ethnic Slovaks, they do not see Slovak folklore and folk culture as being the product of putatively 'pure' Slovaks that should be accessible exclusively to Slovaks. The following interview excerpt aptly illustrates this:

> *I feel Hungarian and I do Slovak folk dance. I really don't care. I live in Slovakia and I am ethnically Hungarian.* […] *I am ethnically Hungarian, but I am also Slovak. I am Slovak and Hungarian at the same time. I live right on the border with Hungary. Once I went for walk along the Danube river*[14] *behind the town and I sneezed, and from the other side of the river, from Hungary, someone said 'Bless you'* [laughter]. *It was really very funny. So really, we are very close I don't see any difference. We are one nation, we are the same people. We just speak different languages.* (Zoltán, 14)

As the above quote demonstrates, the *Slovenskí rebeli* youth reject the idea that language is the foundation of the (ethnically defined) nation and culture. For our informants, belonging to humanity seemed to be more important than being part of the ethnic or linguistic framing. Similarly, in the plot of *Secret Love,* a play set in the 19th century, love is blind to ethnic and linguistic boundaries, just as in the family stories of many of the groups' members whose parents and relatives married across ethnic divides. Therefore, through this notion of 'one culture in two languages', the young people extended the representation of a folklore tradition from another part of the country to convey their vision of their native town, its community, its history and its heritage.

The socio-economic *modus vivendi* of Coventry has been closely connected to refugees and immigrants since perhaps the 17th century. The silk ribbon production that made Coventry famous was probably brought to Britain by French Huguenot refugees (Lau, 2005: 176). The Industrial Revolution, together with WWII, is an important period in the history of Coventry as the cradle of Britain's car industry, and one of the 'national

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14   The Danube forms a natural border between Slovakia and Hungary.

monumental times' (Herzfeld, 1991) in British history. The eras of industrialisation were an important pull factor for labour, not only from less developed parts of the UK, but also from areas under British colonial control.

The historical interconnection between industrialisation, migration and cultural diversity became a central theme of The Theatre's show *Home*. Indeed one of the props used to symbolise the Industrial Revolution in the show – ribbons – is a direct reference to the so-called 'Jacquard loom' exhibited in the city's Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, which was used for the production of silk ribbons in the late 18th century. This representation of the city's heritage and identity also resonates in the narratives of our participants. Melody, a young performer, combined in her interview a modern concern about industrial pollution with a positive vision of the industrial past that brought together people (a workforce) from many different cultural backgrounds and laid the foundations of Coventry's cultural diversity: the core of the city's identity as constructed within the City of Culture discourse.

> *Obviously, it* [the Industrial Revolution] *was a bad thing as well, because it was sending so much pollution into the air, but it was a good thing also because it brought so many people in. That's how, I think, things like that have made Coventry the way it is, because even though bad things did happen... but also that's brought people into Coventry and brought their families over and then brought their culture over.* (Melody, 16)

Arguably, Coventry's industry, which was crucial to the British WWII effort, attracted the heavy Luftwaffe raids that largely destroyed the city. However, the Coventry Blitz,[15] which is central to a mainstream representation of Coventry's history, does not appear as such a significant 'milestone' in *Home*. The show omits any reference to WWII as a formative historical event for the city's culture and identity. The established national narrative of WWII as a monumental time for Britain's cultural heritage is replaced by a new, cosmopolitan discourse of 'cultural diversity'; one is effectively silenced by the other. Melody explained the absence of WWII references in the following manner:

> *I think, maybe, we were trying to focus more on the migration side of things. Obviously, the Blitz was a horrible time, but we all said that the industry and what was being made in Coventry was what brought the most people over.* (Melody, 16)

Despite this celebration of the city's cultural diversity, public attitudes towards migration and UK migration policy remain contested issues both locally and nationally. This was acutely evident in the anti-migrant rhetoric of the 'Leave' campaign during the EU referendum in 2016, in which Coventry returned a majority (55.6%) 'leave' vote.[16] Frustration with Brexit motivated The Theatre practitioners to stage the show *Seen But Never Heard* (SBNH):

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15 The term Coventry Blitz refers to the German air raids in 1940–42 that resulted in the deaths of over 1,200 people (mostly civilians) and the massive destruction of the cityscape.

16 https://www.coventry.gov.uk/info/8/elections_and_voting/867/referendums/4.

I think because when the whole Brexit thing started, it's made us feel, or made me feel, very powerless and very angry. And I think perhaps at some point the things that affect you personally start to be something you, you kind of, it influences your work, and at a time where I feel people are beginning to be persecuted again and we're seeing hate crime rise again in the city... And that's frustrated me and upset me the most, and hearing language coming through in the streets that we would hope would never be heard again. And it's just a very uncomfortable environment. And I think, I do think that working with young people and helping them to see the full story and the truth of something makes some change. (Rachel, 40)

Although the show raises the issues of human rights and discrimination against refugees and migrants, for the young performers the show is about young people *not having a voice* (Gary, 14; June, 15) over their future, as exemplified by the Brexit vote. At the same time, despite being empathetically enacted in the show, there were no migrants among the performers, and their real voices and concerns remained unheard. In the final part of our paper, we explore how and why the inclusivist symbolism of such heritage events was restricted by the lines of exclusion embedded in the performance practices, which are specific to each case.

EXCLUSIVE INCLUSIVITY OF HERITAGE PERFORMANCE

In both cases, the performances were conceived as the collective commemorations of traumatic and important historical events that have shaped the present of their societies. Arguably, this intentional dramatic actualisation of history and memory is enabled by the liminality of performance – an act which is at least temporarily detached from the mundane and normative behaviour of performers and their audiences (Schechner, 1993). Furthermore, the past is creatively re-articulated and re-socialised through performativity in the present 'social time' (Herzfeld, 1991) to enable a liminoid vision of a culturally and socially inclusive future, which is noticeably different from the present status quo. This appeals to the liberal identities of our theatrical groups, who reinvent themselves as Turner's 'communitas'. It is not accidental, perhaps, that our participants refer to their collectives in terms of 'community' and 'family', implying the emergence of a solidarity based on trust and equality. The question remains, however, as to how inclusive these solidarities are, beyond their declared desire to contest the ethnic and racial inequalities still prevalent in today's society. To answer this question, we need to look beyond the symbolism of the plays to consider the manner of performance (Schieffelin, 2013), as well as the positions of performers and their audiences within the power coordinates of their respective societies (Weber, 1995).

Although it is difficult to apply an unambiguous class categorisation in the post-socialist context of Komárno, all the young performers in *Slovenskí rebeli* came from an affluent socio-economic background. This was manifested, for instance, in their affiliation with the country's Slovak linguistic majority, regardless of their ethnic identification. All of them were or had been students at the town's best high schools, where Slovak is the language of instruction; partly because of this, they aspired to and were able to enrol in good universities across the country. All the performers were fluent

Slovak speakers, even though some identified as Hungarian. Many of our participants grew up bilingual and came from ethnically-mixed families or socialised with friends from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, for some of the informants from ethnically-homogeneous families, their first language was not their parents' mother tongue. Hungarian parents often communicated with their children in Slovak and vice versa.

Slovak is the language of communication within the group and the language of *Slovenskí Rebeli*'s performances. The irony is that the culturally-inclusive message of the group's performances is inaccessible to Hungarians who do not speak Slovak. Nor do their ideas reach Hungarian or Slovak nationalists, for they oppose the group's activities on principle. Although the bona fide motives of the *Slovenskí rebeli* are convincing, the dominance of the Slovak language has an effect on the content of the performance when the region's complex history is presented mainly from the Slovak perspective. As we saw with the absence of the Hungarian perspective in the play *Helenka*, the apparent inclusiveness of the group's diverse cultural heritage does not challenge the dominant role of the ethnic majority in legitimising minority heritage. Therefore, the apparent inclusivity remains rather limited.

In the case of Coventry, the majority of young participants originate from white British middle-class families,[17] who often uphold the liberal values of tolerance and inclusivity, which they consider under threat from the growing nationalism in British politics (as indicated by Brexit).[18] This is reflected in the very nature of the activities they take part in. The Theatre training sessions and shows are in a way an extension of and addition to the young performers' familial cultural socialisation. The Theatre's weekly sessions provide an external space (in relation to family and school) in which they can interact with peers and develop skills and knowledge. At the same time, their attendance of these sessions and participation in shows is enabled by their families through logistical and financial support (driving them to and from the Theatre's rehearsals late at night and sometimes from outside the city; paying for weekly sessions, etc.). The family is also the main audience of the youth theatre's shows and a testing ground for the views that the young people develop through their participation in The Theatre's projects. In other words, the young people's families have to value and approve of the format and content of these activities as being beneficial for their children, which suggests that they in general share the liberal cosmopolitan ideology and the avant-garde aesthetics of the physical theatre. Learning and practicing performing arts is seen as an enabling experience by the young people and their parents. The participants stress that taking part in the youth theatre facilitates the development of such transferable skills as trust, teamwork and, above all, confidence. These are seen as important qualities for professional and personal success (Julia, 15; Claire, 48).[19]

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17 The participants' socio-demographic data, including their age, gender, ethnicity, citizenship, language(s) they are fluent in, household membership and religious affiliation, were collected during the interviews. Families where one or both parents held a position that required a university level qualification were considered 'middle-class'.

18 For example, many of our participants reported that their parents and family friends voted 'remain' in the EU referendum in June 2016, and subsequently saw Brexit as an expression of the growing xenophobia and racism in Britain.

19 Self-confidence as a quality developed through participation in drama activities was also mentioned by the young performers in Komárno (Martin, 25; Lenka, 14). This perhaps reflects their affluent socio-economic background, which is rather similar to the Coventry case study in this respect.

At the same time, as a performance genre, the avant-garde physical theatre represents a certain exclusion line for those young people who are not socialised in that tradition of bodily expression within art and drama. Interestingly, this exclusivity within an otherwise overtly liberal and culturally inclusive theatre was largely unrecognised by both the young people and The Theatre practitioners. Thus, the empathetic portrayal of refugees in the *SBNH* show did not attract young migrants to join The Theatre, despite an attempt to reach them via a partnership with the Coventry Migrants and Refugee Centre. A single Syrian refugee girl wearing a headscarf attended one session with a senior group. Although she was warmly welcomed and gently introduced to the training routine, she was visibly taken aback by the intensity and closeness of the bodily contact during the warm-up and rehearsal. Despite the empathy, at that session she was asked to act in accordance with the majoritarian performative culture of the avant-garde physical theatre; there were no room for her to express her agency as a performer on her own terms and through corporal actions that were culturally familiar and appropriate to her. Interestingly, in the actual *SBNH* show the character of the 'refugee girl' was also portrayed as lacking agency; she acquired her voice only as an adult fully integrated into British society.

The Theatre's empathetic enactment of 'the other' serves to combine young people's socialisation with the liberal political values of their families, reproducing the particular form of class distinction that absorbs cosmopolitanism as an aspect of cultural identification. The form and content of these performances remain inaccessible to their protagonists (migrants, minorities, destitute people), who are absent among the performers and the audience. As some observers have noted, in practice cosmopolitan developments can be utilised in 'other assemblages' and 'co-opted' for other objectives (Novicka, Rovisco, *Eds.*, 2009, cited in Macdonald, 2013: 189) that could further entrench social inequalities, including those thought of in terms of cultural and/or racial differences.

CONCLUSION

The theatrical performances analysed in this paper are modalities of imagining and experiencing the past, and therefore form part of the same 'past presencing' (Macdonald, 2013) tendencies that can be observed in more traditional heritage sites (such as museums, for example). In both cases, the past is presented in public discourses in order to manifest and uphold the values of cultural diversity and inclusion in the construction of local identities. However, there are noticeable differences in the discursive framing of inclusiveness, with a cosmopolitan discourse of human rights being prevalent in Coventry, and cultural differences and diversity being conveyed more in ethno-national terms in Komárno.

Our analysis of inclusive heritage performances by the Theatre and *Slovenskí rebeli* demonstrates that the efficacy of such events in forming new public solidarities is restricted by the social inequalities and cultural distinctions embedded in the performative practices themselves. Because of the culturally and socially exclusive artistic forms and perspectives, these performances and their symbolic meanings are hard to access by individuals from outside these rather privileged groups. As Ernst Bloch asserts: 'Not all people exist in the same Now. They do so only externally, through the

fact that they can be seen today. But they are thereby not yet living at the same time with others' (Bloch, 1977, cited in Simon, Ashley, 2010: 248).

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